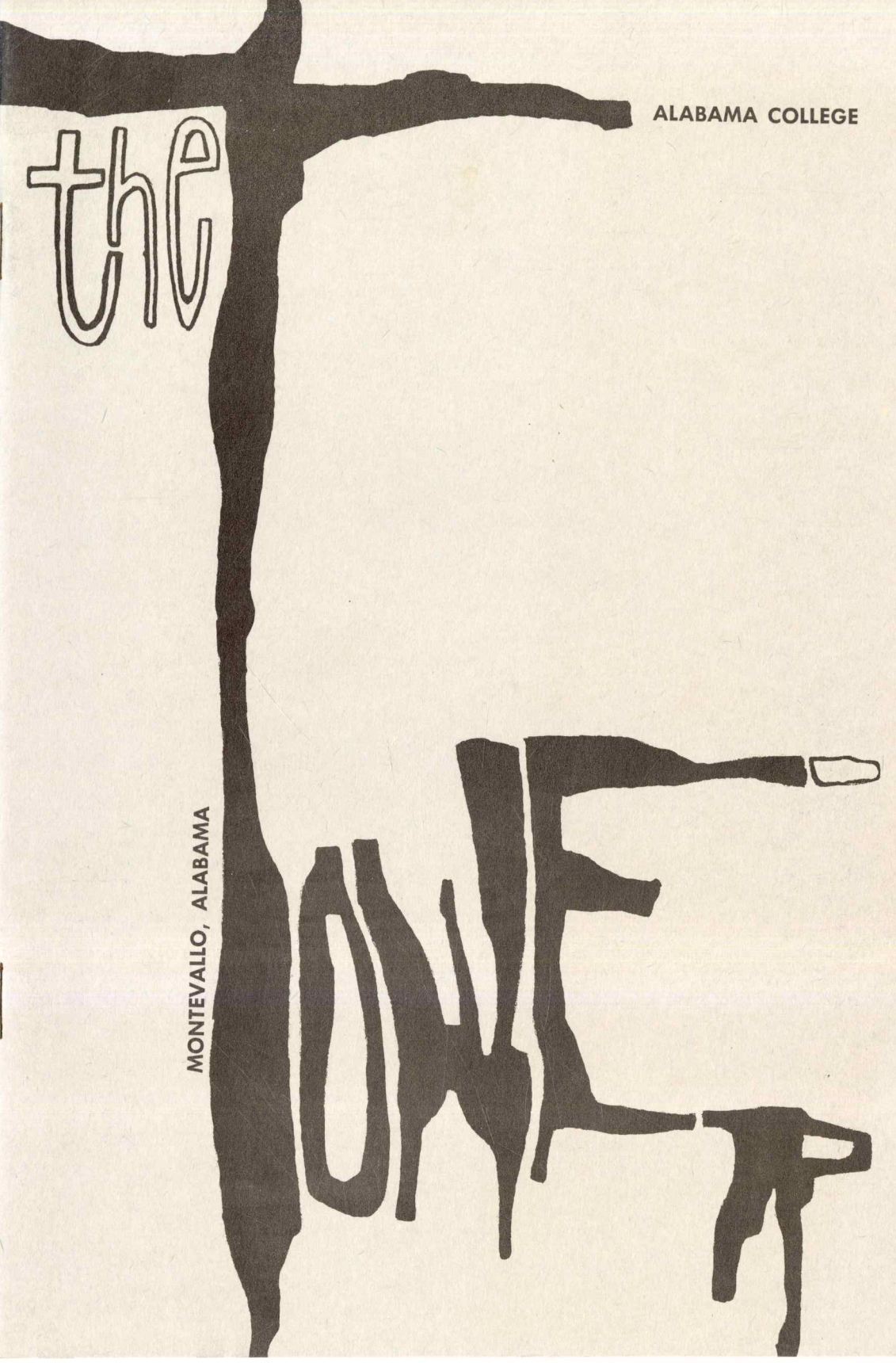
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the
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MONTEVALLO, ALABAMA

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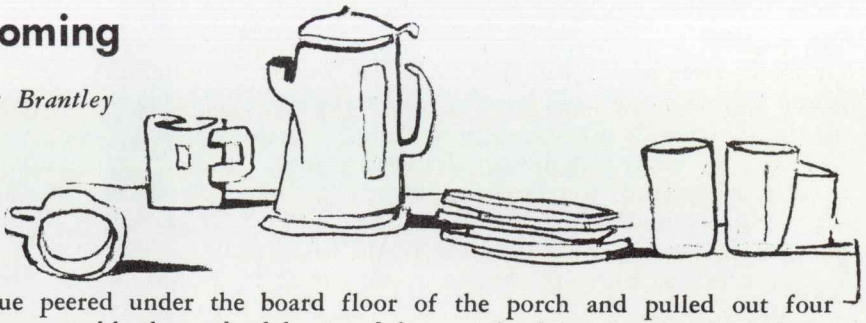
A Homecoming

Joy Brantley



Suzieque peered under the board floor of the porch and pulled out four empty beer cans with the end of her yard broom. Straightening her back painfully, she regarded her twin brother, a man of thirty, who sat on the bottom doorstep a few feet away, chin propped on knees, drawing with a tree trig in the freshly swept sand.

"Looks like you could at least hide the evidence good if you got to be sneaking about your nasty habits, John William," she rebuked as she whacked the cans one by one with the broom and sent them flying into the pile of leaves, sand, and trash at the corner of the yard. John William never looked up. He addressed himself to the stick figure which he was drawing, "If you wadn't so damn nosey, and always trying to make me into a old maid companion for yourself, we'd have a lot more peace and quiet around here."

Suzieque, disregarding him, placed her broom out of sight beneath the bottom step and pulled forth two rusted car tags. Surveying the smooth broom marks which flowed across the hard packed ground and converged at the trash pile, she reflected cheerfully, "Nothing better looking in this world than a clean swept yard. John William, you go take up the trash, I got to go clean Papa up before she comes." As she spoke she extended the rusted tags in her brother's direction.

John William abruptly slammed his hand down on a half completed stick figure, mashing it into the sand. "Sweeping yards on Sunday morning! Even putting clean pajamas on a old man that don't know he's in this world! Don't it occur to you we're putting on the dog a little too much for somebody who run off leaving not a word but a sassy note, and ain't let on we was in the world for two months!"

Suzieque's face, brown and wrinkled for its thirty years, dropped as if a familiar burden had been heaped on it. She lowered herself onto the step beside her brother and patted his knee uneasily. "John William, I wish you would for once decide to act right. I can't help how slighted we feel, Mary Francis is still our baby sister and we need to treat her as such." She paused dramatically, then continued with increased enthusiasm, "You'd think she had committed some shameful crime! Just because we ain't never been married is no sign she should be treated like dirt because she did."

John William clinched his teeth and replied grimly, "It ain't the marrying I object to, its the circumstances she did it under. Running off like that with a little shirttail boy, leaving Papa on his sick bed . . . Do you think it was just chance that caused him to have that last stroke the night after we had to tell him she'd gone off and married?"

At last he raised his face from his knees to gaze stormily at his sister. His face, like hers, was old and worn. Their features were remarkably similar, the only striking difference being the eyes. Hers were alive, blue and eager, as if given any small excuse they would brighten. His were still and dead, as if they had seen more of life than they wanted, and wished to see no more.

They sat holding each other's gaze for several moments, as if they had taken up an old childhood game of seeing who could stare longest at the other with-

out batting an eye or looking away. Then Suzieque pulled the corners of her small mouth down and frowned imploringly. She took another approach. "You know why she's coming today, doncha? She said specific in the letter . . . 'I'll be down Sunday afternoon so as to be sure and ketch Johnny home!' . . . Course she said she was anxious to see me and Papa too, but she wants to see you specially. Now—do you still plan on treating her like dirt under your feet?"

John William lowered his face into his hands, "Just go on and leave me alone Suzieque. Quit picking my soul out. You know how much I cared for that youngun, but I ain't catering to her after the way she's done."

Suzieque sighed in exasperation, slapped her knees, rose, and started up the steps. On the top step she turned, "All I ask is that you act decent, for the sake of peace in the family if nothing else!"

Suzieque was drying the last dinner dish when she heard a car pull into the front yard. Throwing down the dish cloth she ran to the back door and hollered to John William, who sat in the noonday sun of the doorstep, "She's here; she's early!" Then running to the back bedroom, she approached the big, shiny, formal-looking hospital bed and leaned over, yelling into the old man's ear, "Papa, Mary Francis is here! She's come to see us!" The old man did not stir, but continued to stare into the paint-peeled boards of the ceiling. His mouth hung open like a dark cave between the sunken, whiskered cheeks.

Suzieque waited a moment for some response, then straightened the clean, red striped pajamas over the old sunken chest. Hurriedly, she pushed the stiff chin upward, closing the mouth. "We just don't look our Sunday best with our mouth wide open, do we Papa?" She spoke as if addressing a small child. "You don't believe she's here do you, think I'm fooling you to roust some action out of you; but you'll see, bless your heart, you'll see!"

She ran from the bedroom into the living room just as Mary Francis pulled open the screen door and stuck her head in, concealing her body behind the doorframe. "Baby!" screamed Suzieque, as Mary Francis retrieved her head, leaving only a hand in sight, still holding the screen open. "What you hiding for Baby, don't your old sister get a hug?" Suzieque had already reached the porch and grabbed the girl, rocking her from side to side in her arms. "We all been dying to see you; couldn't wait when we got your letter. Lemme look at you!"

Suzieque held the girl at arms length and pinched her sweaty cheek. "Still pretty as ever, that face is finally clearing up; marriage is agreeing with you!" Mary Francis tried to smile, then dropped her head and looked at her feet.

Suzieque followed her gaze, and for the first time, saw the slightly protruding, round little belly, ill-concealed by the loose fitted blue taffeta smock, and the too-tight, shiny black shirt. Unconsciously her hands fell to her sides, then bunched in front of her as she twisted a small handkerchief she had not known she held. Her eyes darted from the girl's body to the handkerchief. She remembered she had put it into her pocket, fresh from a little sachet box Mary Francis had given her. She tried to remember how the powder smelled. "To a Wild Rose" was written in looping red letters across the top of the box. She could see the words plainly, but the smell would not come. She lifted the handkerchief to her nose. It smelled of dishwater.

Mary Francis stood before her tracing a crack in the boards of the floor with the toe of her shoe—up and down, up and down. Suzieque twisted the handerchief numbly, making tight little knots as the silence grew.

She suddenly clapped her hands together, and said with loud brightness, "Well! Where's that husband of yours—Harold—Isn't that his name? We're all anxious to meet em. Lord, these flies are bad, less go in. I'll find John William, you set there on the sofa and rest."

Suzieque hurried across the room as she spoke. She could feel herself blushing. It seemed suddenly, everything she said was embarrassing.

She found John William on the back steps, exactly as he had been when she left him. Closing the screen door quietly, she said in a low voice, "John William, would you please go over to the store and get a carton of cold drinks. It's mighty hot and we could stand some freshening." John William jerked his head to glare at her, "You mean you ain't come to drag me in there to talk baby talk and make over her like you're doing?" Suzieque untwisted her handkerchief and pulled at its corners, then went on, ignoring his words, "Get two R.C.'s, two Grapes, a Orange, and a Co-cola if you can remember—if you can't, then get all R.C.'s."

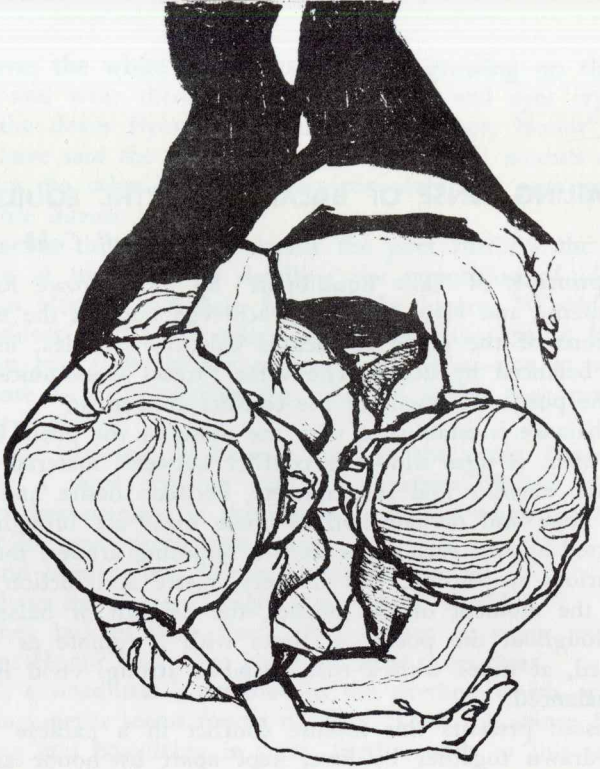
She waited until he rounded the corner and started the truck motor, then tip toed across the kitchen into the old man's bedroom. He lay as before, staring at the ceiling. Suzieque approached the bed and whispered, "Papa?" then pulled the lids down over the glassy eyes. When they did not bounce open again, she sighed, returned to the kitchen and filled a dishpan with unshelled butterbeans.

Then she re-entered the living room speaking loudly, "I thought I'd shell these beans while we chat. Johnny had to go over to Mr. Sercy's and help look for a new calf. Said if he didn't get back in time to see you, for me to give you his love. Papa's asleep right now, and since he was awake all night I hate to try and roust him. He's had another stroke since you left. Paralyzed him all over this time and his eyes is gone. I doubt he'd know you, but when he's able to talk, he always calls for you, bless his heart!" As her sister talked, Mary Francis leaned over the simulated mahogany coffee table and straightened two doilies which were already straight. John William had bought the table with cotton money, two years ago when she was sixteen, and started having boy callers. It always made her happy to look at it, because it stood out and made the shabby room look nicer. Slowly, her chin began to quiver. She interrupted her sister in the middle of a sentence, "Suzieque is Johnny mad at me?" For a moment there was no sound except for beans dropping into the tin bottomed pan, then Suzieque spoke hurriedly, "Why no, Baby, where'd you get a notion like that? We was both a little hurt at not being invited to the wedding, but . . ."

"But see we couldn't invite you to the wedding 'cause we was already married, had been since March, five months ago!" She spoke eagerly as if this information had been stored inside her too long and had to be revealed.

Suzieque dropped her hands, feeling relief flow through her body. Then she remembered, trying not to remember, that Mary Francis had courted with the Sercy boy all through March and hadn't met Harold 'till May. She lifted another butterbean and ripped open the hull with nervous fingers. Silence grew heavy as the beans hit the bottom of the pan and hulls dropped softly on the floor. Suzieque's face grew red and flushed as she tried to think of something to say. Finally Mary Francis stood and walked to the door, speaking in a faulty voice, "Suzieque, I better go, I told Harold I'd be back early." "You can't stay for supper?" Suzieque strained to keep the relief out of her voice. "Well, you got to promise and come back real soon, John William will hate it that he missed you."

Thirty minutes later, John William returned carrying a carton of drinks and a large paper sack. He found Suzieque in the living room, crying quietly as she shelled butterbeans. Dropping the drink carton on the floor with a bang, he walked to the front porch and propped himself in the swing. Taking a can of beer from the sack, he opened and regarded it thoughtfully, then drank it in two gulps and threw the empty can toward the old picket fence that bordered the yard. It bounced from the fence onto the clean swept ground. John William looked at it for awhile, then drew another can from the sack.



THE LOVERS

The warm air of evening met them
With caressing kisses of mountain breeze.
The river's roar sank to the murmur of bees.
And was lost under the dark tossed boughs.

The moon in full sail among the stars
was a serene swan on a lotus pool.
Mountains and meadow withdrew into night's cool.
The wind moved silently through dark tossed boughs.

Quiet settled comfortably into the valley
And wrapped peacefully around the two
Who clung tightly together in fresh dew
And heard tiny flowers stirring at their feet.

Night in a warm dark cloak drew near
Whispering of caressing kisses, murmur of bees.
Comfortable quiet lay softly under the trees
In the gentle world of newborn love.

Margaret Sarah Hearn

THE PREVAILING SENSE OF BALANCE IN "THE EQUILIBRISTS"

Buell Cobb

The whole principle of "The Equilibrists" by John Crowe Ransom is that of balance. An intense and vivid balance is achieved both in the essence and in the particularizations of the poem as idea is balanced by idea, image balanced by image, detail balanced by detail. The verse further communicates this sense of balance and the poet's treatment of the conflict clinches it.

First of all, balance is established with the thesis of the poem being the conflict which, for man, is ages old—the conflict between material and spiritual values, between the abstract and the concrete, between desire and honor, emotion and reason, hope and despair. All of these ideas are brought together in the poem and pitted against each other as two opposing armies; they meet, clash and lock in a furious suspension, and imagery, metre and diction as echoes of the clash record the moment of the impact, the heighth of balance, and send it resounding throughout the poem—at times with a rumble as when graphic words are balanced, at times with a roar as when strong, vivid images are set in contrast and balanced.

Further, Ransom presents this intense conflict in a parable form of two lovers, who are drawn together by love, kept apart by honor and, therefore, balanced by the combination of the two. "Bound each to each" yet torn apart by the "gray word," they are rigid, balanced and "twirled/ About the clustered night their prison world." Love as a two-fold state exemplifies the conflict of ideas, for it embodies both a spiritual and a physical nature. It is important that Ransom has chosen love to convey this contrast, for what, more than love, incorporates both desire and honor, passion and intellect, and exhibits both a base and an ethereal aspect?

The further conveyance of balance is achieved in the symbolism which Ransom chooses to represent the two realms of ideas here in conflict. The desire of the lovers is symbolized as Drew and Sweeney write in *Directions in Modern Poetry,* by "all the joys of the bodily senses," "the white flesh which is tinder to lechery; the gleam of jacinth, the perfume of myrrh, the texture of ivory, the warmth of the flame of physical union, the fertility of field, the blossoming and sweetness of lilies." The effect of these symbols is balanced, however, by the cold, impassive symbols of the spirit and of honor—the gaunt tower of the head, the gray doves and the gray word, Honor, "cold as steel." Thus in two lovers' arms—lax, then taut, emitting heat, then crystallizing into icy torture—Ransom has drawn in, through symbolism, reiterations of the thesis and strengthened and intensified the idea of prevailing balance.

The poem's sense of balance is further made apparent to the reader because of Ransom's balancing of mounting details. Each detail revealing the consuming sensual desire of the lover is met by a detail representing the realm of Honor. As each successive detail further intensifies the feeling of desire each detail from the opposite realm is of equal force and a sense of the inability of either motive to completely triumph is established.

Ransom begins first by describing her mouth, "from which came heat that flamed upon the kiss;" but this is countered by the reference to the cold words coming spiraling down from her head. In the next pair of opposing details, further intensified, her body is a white field, lying open, "ready for love," yearning to be claimed. But the "gaunt tower above," cold and impassive, casts a

dark shadow over the white field. Finally, lilies growing on the field beseech him to "pluck and wear them, bruise and break" and eyes cry "Embrace my flowers." But the doves flying downward cry, "Honor, Honor" and what the lilies and eyes have said the doves unsay. As each detail mounts on one side the counterpart from the other increases proportionately and each successive balancing becomes more intense and vivid.

After balancing the mounting details the poet furthers the feeling of this inherent balance of the poem by detailing the opposition of ideas in two opposed stanzas on Heaven and Hell. He asks the lovers, "Would you ascend to Heaven and bodiless dwell?/ Or take your bodies honorless to Hell?" and then sets before them two poles in the contrasting stanzas—one to which they may go if they choose to fulfill desire, the other to which they may cling if they choose to preserve Honor.

Conveying the principle of balance even to the verse, Ransom achieves an exact vocabulary, a steady rhythm and a symmetrical rhyme and stanza form. All of these are demonstrated in the following stanza when the balance between the lovers is at its most precipitous stage:

> And rigid as two painful stars, and twirled
> About the clustered night their prison world,
> They burned with fierce love always to come near,
> But Honor beat them back and kept them clear.

First of all, a steadiness is attained in the rhythm, which, while it is never limp or sprawling, never seems forced or tight. Then the stanza form, four lines meeting, rhyming and equalizing in pairs, further adds to this sense. That each two lines rhyme is to the further heightening of the sense of balance in this example since desire is represented in the first and third lines and honor in the second and fourth. Thus as the second line rhymes with the first and the fourth matches the third, the feeling is given that the forces of honor are equal to those of desire, that any force or expression of the lovers' desire is always to be countered and balanced by their commitment to honor.

In this same stanza the exactness and vividness of the vocabulary serve to further promote the prevailing balance of the poem. In the first line conveying the idea of desire, Ransom uses the words "painful" and "twirled" and balances them in the next line with the words "clustered" and "prison," representing honor. "Painful" gives desire the image of growing, penetrating, self-enveloping. We see the lovers as burning, writhing in an agony of desire. "Clustered" in the next line gives a converse effect. Smug, huddled, stagnated, shriveled, cold, are the image of the lovers called up by this word choice and we see them frozen into immobility. "Twirled" calls to mind the brilliance, the explosiveness, the dizziness of desire, while in the next line "prison" pictures dark, cold walls enclosing lovers chained by honor. Each of these single words stimulates various senses and thus when a balance is achieved between two words we see heat, light and motion locked with cold, dark and stillness and the flame is not of more force than the ice.

The final sense of balance comes in that Ransom gives no solution to this conflict. Seemingly perplexed, he balances the question. He puts it before the lovers, but they must never give an answer. In the grave, ruin and decay come to lips and skull, but the question remains unanswered and the lovers lie "close, but untouching."

It is seen then that the prevailing principle of "The Equilibrists" is that of balance, that thought and expression, from the broadest form to the most minute part, work toward the full realization of this principle. Ransom has captured and vividly and forcefully communicated man's inherent conflict and universal problem in a "perilous" suspension, a "beautiful" moment of balance.

A TIME FOR THIS, A TIME FOR THAT

Look to the flowers,
List to the wind,
Let April's fragrance court you.
The air is full of promises,
Of sweet visions of green meadows beckoning,
And emerald pools awaiting your soul's egress.
Or walk among the multicolored leaves that died willingly,
And think thoughts of satisfaction while you may.
Winter brings darker musings.

David Godbold

A CHRISTIAN GOD

The Christians are a brilliant folk
For cleverly have they
Enlarged the boundaries of grace
To cover where they stray.

The Christians' god is powerful—
A great gigantic fool
Who stupidly enforces
What the brilliant Christians rule.

And they've convinced their loving god
That every Christian ought
To be excused one sin each day
In word and deed and thought.

The Christians sing and preach and pray
And sin—Yes, all of this.
Astute and clever, they betray
Their dumb god with a kiss.

Wallace Murphree

THE FOREST DARK

The thick green dark and the whispering moon
Lay deep as grey roses.
Curved necks swept low with water on fetlocks;
Black horses were drinking.

And the water ran on
Past the horses' feet.

Ride on rang the stars and the hollow-voiced moon
Ride and never look back.
Do you hear hard hooves on the trail behind you
Thunder over the hills.

And the manes did shake
As the water sped on.

Sound rounded now, driving bright musky shadows
Against their grey hearts.
And ebony horses whirling brown water
Startled sleeping swans.

And cicadas woke
Round the brown water.

Down and deep down the wide stream they ran
As miles and eons went past.
An inlet of rushes mid closing night flowers
Hid horses and riders.

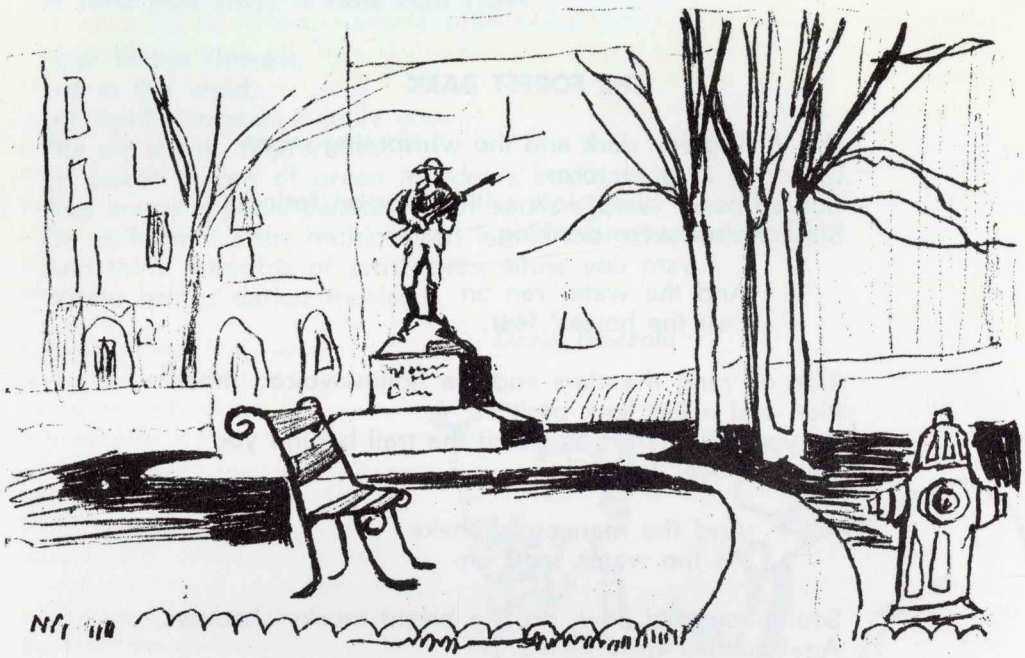
And a great umber hawk
Flew circling behind.

Glowing bright embers faces in shadow
False as red traitors.
And the glow of the deed spread over the land,
Growing and falling.

And water rushed by them
Without looking back.

Martha Folmer

The Square



Joy Brantley

Lingering shades from a vanished sun colored a few clouds sitting on a distant fence-row. Pebo, sensing the quietness of the field, pushed his thoughts out of the void into which they slid as he mechanically plucked monotonous cotton from clutching bolls. He stood for a woment, pulled by the distant babbling of the crowd by the road, then bent over wilted stalks again, thinking, this ole row ain't long . . . fill this sack and I'll have a hundred. With renewed strength he picked faster because this was Saturday evening, which meant no more work 'til Monday. The last row finished, he shouldered the sack, which bumped against his legs and kicked up small puffs of dust as he walked along the path to the road. The others waited in the ditch for the truck to come. The women gossipped and fed their babies that had lain under the bushes of the fence-row through the long afternoon. Children darted about on skinny brown legs, shouting, chasing, tumbling, and giggling. Red dust clung like soft dry patches on sweat-splotched shirts of the men, who lay resting in the ditch, heads propped on cottonsacks.

The truck was heard in the distance as Pebo dropped his sack in the ditch and squatted on it. Instantly there was movement as bodies rose, sacks were heaved, and all came to stand beside the road. The truck stopped before the crowd; Mr. Sam swung down, hauled out the cotton scales and the weighing began. The bulging sacks of the men, the full sacks of the women, and the meager sacks of the children clung to the sharp scale-hook, dangled and dropped. This was Pebo's proudest moment, his payment for long hours of methodical picking under searing heat, while the other children strayed to the coolness of the fence-row to see 'bout the baby, git a drink, or rest a little. His sack, the last to dangle from the scale-hook, was as heavy as the grown fokes, and he glowed with quiet pride under the admiration of the others and the praise from Mr. Sam.

After pounds had been figured into money, and money distributed carefully into outstretched black hands, the cotton was poured into the truck body, and tired workers clammered in on top. Pebo sat alone, letting his feet dangle over the edge and mingle with the dust which spurted from the turning wheels. The truck plotted along, stopping at small shacks along the road where families piled out, after much joking, jostling, and shouting.

Pebo's family was the last to climb from the truck, since they lived only a few miles from Mr. Sam. Unexpectedly, Mr. Sam cut the motor, climbed from the truck and said after some hesitation, "If ya'll still ain't got a ride to town, I'll let you take the truck, but you got to be careful and bring it back at a decent hour." The children shouted happily and bounced up and down. Pebo's father jumped in the truck and yelled as Mr. Sam drove away, "Ya'll better ever one be ready time I git back or you gone git left!"

The tired shack sighed and creaked under the impact of slamming dresser drawers, running feet and a general frenzy of preparation. Pebo was the last child to lean over the tin pan, bring cold water to his face and dry hastily on a flour sack towel. He quickly dressed in his best overalls and drew stiff Sunday shoes over dusty feet. His mother rushed about plaiting wiry hair, attaching multi-colored ribbons, making bows in dingy rayon sashes and tying shoes on the tiniest feet. The frenzy increased as the truck horn was heard outside. "Com'on, ya'll kin finish in the truck," cried his mother to no one and everyone. The family scrambled out of the house and into the truck once more.

After what seemed a long ride, the truck clattered across a railroad track and swung into a vacant lot on Love Street. The family climbed down and headed for the sidewalk bordered by pool halls, liquor joints, general merchandise stores and fish markets. These establishments, and the people who patronized them, comprised what was commonly called Nigger Section.

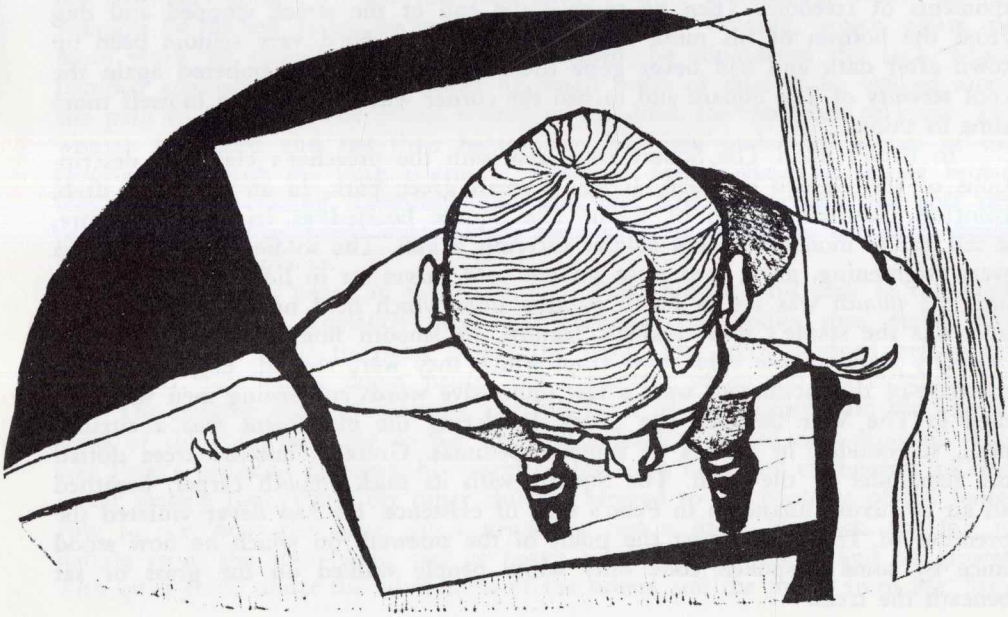
Pebo debated as he walked along the crowded sidewalk. He knew he should stay with his mother if he wanted to eat supper or buy anything, but tonight he felt an odd, adventurous exhilaration, a desire to be independent. Darting into the happy shifting waves along the pavement he left the others and wandered down the crowded street, bothered by the idea that he was wasting precious moments of freedom. Then he reached the end of the street, stopped and dug from the bottom of his mind a half-explored idea. He'd very seldom been up town after dark and had never gone there alone, but he remembered again the cool serenity of The Square and turned the corner without allowing himself more time to think.

In Pebo's mind The Square coincided with the preacher's elaborate descriptions of the Garden of Eden. It was a small green park, in an otherwise drab, colorless, business section of town. The Square boasted as its central feature, a tall ganite monument of a soldier carrying a gun. The soldier's stone features were frightening, grim; eyes were smooth cold curves set in lidless stone sockets; and the mouth was set in harsh parallel lines which held no hint of life. The gun was the statue's most realistic feature. Its smooth lines and curves seemed perfectly fitted to the cold stone from which they were shaped. Engraved along the base of the monument were a few impressive words concerning men who had died in The War Between the States. Bordering the monument was a circular pool, surrounded by masses of summer petunias. Graceful mimosa trees dotted the remainder of the lawn. The Square, with its thick smooth carpet, breathed an air of luxury unknown in Pebo's type of existence. He had never violated the premises of The Square past the point of the sidewalk on which he now stood since by some unspoken code only white people walked on the grass or sat beneath the trees.

Now he stood for a long time gazing at the pool shimmering under the glow of distant neon. His senses, accustomed to smells of old grease hardened in the pan, dead fires on the hearth, sweat dried skin and damp, dirty mattresses, were overwhelmed by light, clean grass and flower smells. Suddenly, he felt an irresistible urge to walk barefooted in the grass under the deep shadows of the trees, and feel the wet dew on hot dirty feet. To avoid these thoughts, he turned quickly and walked down the street, then stopped, feeling a clear piercing rise from the void behind his thoughts and burst into a question. This was the gnawing pain and agonizing desperation which always made him hide the question. Looking down at brown hands, stiff shoes and dusty ankles he felt the familiar shame fill his body. Suddenly he realized that he was still by The Square. He turned to the grass and flowers again, trying desperately to recapture his former exhilaration, but now his eyes wandered unwillingly toward the statue. Somehow the cold, smooth, unseeing eyes glared straight at him. In terror, he turned away.

Before him he saw for the first time long black stretches of sidewalk untouched by the street light. A group of surly white boys loafed on the corner which separated Pebo from Love Street. Panic rose smothering reason, and instinctively he began to run. He heard with agony, hoping the group on the corner would not hear, the vacant pounding of his feet. Panic rose more unbearably as he dashed toward the group. Through fear-stricken eyes he saw that they greeted him with nothing more than lazy amusement and a chorus of "You *better* run boy!" A block later he rounded the corner of Love Street and walked numbly through the crowded confusion of drifting, wailing juke-box tunes, shouting, food smells, and laughter, back to the truck.

A few of the children had already strayed to the truck and lay sleeping on the floor. Pebo crept through small, still bodies and squatted instinctively in the darkest corner. He sat quietly gathering strength to push when it rose again, as he knew it would, bringing the familiar pain. He felt it already and was too tired to resist. The vision came—of thick, smooth grass, clean shimmering water, feathery trees and flower smells. Then the unanswerable question rose, slowly pierced the surface and burst forth.



POEM

I

Spring treads in feet unshod
through snow that lighted yesternoon
on trembling yellow.

birds recall her coming.

a lissome goddess
blown into buxom Summer sighing
for Autumn's golden hand
(her fragrance
flees the dusky rose)
to stain the poet's page.

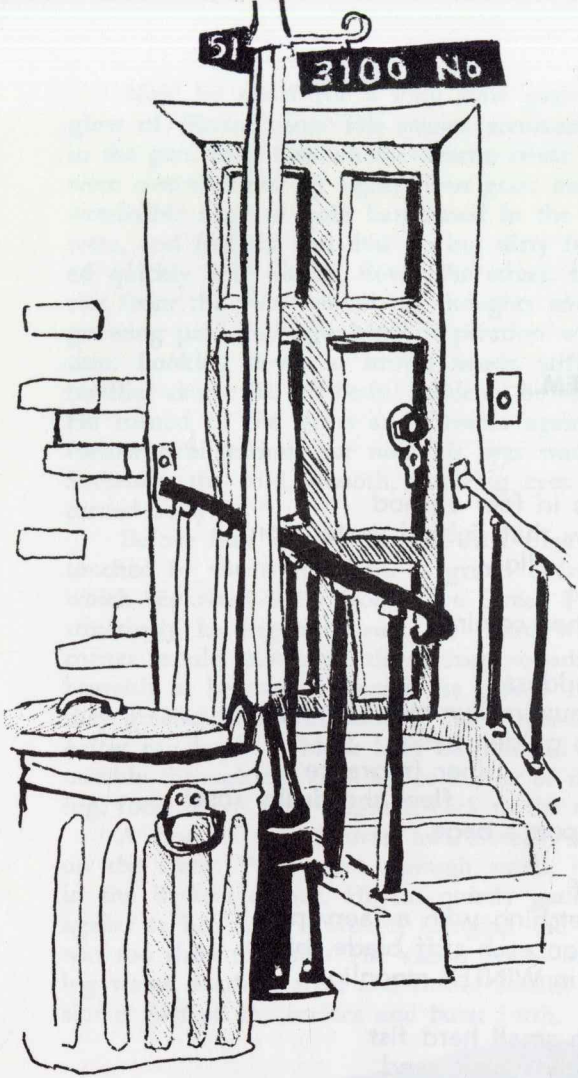
then days of
sketching with a faery pen
on each stiff blade, black
in WINTER moonlight.

SPRING with small hard fist
raps on Winter's pane. and

II

Silent winged lovers scream white.
red becomes a color.

Wanda F. Miller



As I Recall

Jim Morgan

It's funny, you know. By that I mean the ironics of life, how we all start out even and go our various ways and oftimes end up in a situation contrary to what you would expect. Like for instance the way Frankie, Gut, and I turned out.

We all arrived at early teenhood with about the same background—white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant, and pleasantly in the middle class. Gut's parents were separated and practically strangers to each other, while the parents of Frankie and me treated us like we were accidents, so neither of us cared to stay around his house very much. We were always up to some mischief together. I guess it was the similiarity of background that drew us together and the familiar strife that caused the rebellious attitude we had then. Now, Gut, Frankie, and me can accept the dicotomy of good and bad that society enforces, but then, well, then it wasn't a sin to us to swipe our adolescent necessities, only a sin if we got caught.

When we first started our clique we ran through a streak of vandalism but then we soon settled down into a peaceful pattern of shoplifting.

The vandalism by matter of course had to take place nocturnally and as the weaker sex had found a niche in our mode of living about this time, we felt constrained to use the darker hours for more suitable entertainment. However,

the hours after school still had to be put to use. Our families were financially placed so that we did not have to pursue the plebeian necessity of work, so the natural thing to do was to shoplift.

We had many delights in shoplifting, and, much to our glory, we were never caught. There were some close calls though. I recall one in particular.

I guess I remember this one in particular, out of the many, because of its personal salience to me. Perhaps it would be of value to you to hear my story. Let me take you back with me to a small town in Florida, in the early 1950's. The season is summer, a hot summer. The time, sometime around four o'clock. The stores are not busy and though the extra chance you took by "taking," as we called it, in a near-empty store gave rise to a feeling of exhilaration, on that afternoon we had decided that the risk of discovery was too great. We broke down and bought some shirts at one of the up-town Church Street stores.

We meandered around through some of our favorite stores, that is, the ones that were owned by friends of our fathers. They were so easy to shoplift in that they provided a constant temptation to us to limit our "patronage" to them alone. However, they weren't much of a challenge and so we visited them mostly to decide what to lift at the other stores. Well, like I say, we had each bought some shirts with our generous allowances. (Our parents always marveled at our thrift, seeing as how we "bought" all our clothes and provided our entertainment on what little they gave us.)

We decided to visit the "gypsy" side of the business district, so-called because of the habit of the stores there to change owners and formats frequently.

We sort of drifted into the district casually, so as not to alert the grapevine as to anything suspicious. The grapevine consisted of a man either standing by his outside display or inside his open doorway, depending upon his aversion to heat or his degree of avarice. They were mostly dark, swarthy Jews who catered to the Negroes and the "poor white trash," the Cubans, of the town. Their mode of attack was the same in content though the actual words were slurred by several different dialects.

They would take you by the arm and describe their stock to you, relenting only when you admitted that you hadn't any money, then the hold would be released with a "Well, I open all the time, you come see me, I fix you up real good." Then they'd scurry back into the shade like the crabs that chased the morning tide on the beach.

It was this singular attentiveness to their customers that made us wary of this area. In our childish innocence we possessed none of the sophistication that is characteristic of today's shoplifters. Our *modus operanti* was to merely get what we wanted, stuff it in our bags, or under our shirts and walk out. If we were observed, as we would be in the "gypsy" stores, this obviously wouldn't work.

Gut was a little apprehensive about us going to any "gypsy" stores, for if we were discovered in the act we would have to run. Gut had been so nicknamed because of the weight that he threw around, so to speak. While it was a great advantage to him while engaged in a skuffle, it presented a distinct hazard to him if an angry Jew was in hot pursuit.

Nonetheless, Gut was still with Frankie and me as we found ourselves facing a large sign that proclaimed with faded red letters, "Going Out of Business" and "Last Chanze Foe Bargains." The rough spelling was momentarily alarming until we noticed the artist's signature at the bottom of the sign, "Pepe Castro." This coupled with the sign "Se Habla Espanol Aqui," allayed our fears as to the owners proficiency of the English language. Spanish we could understand, Negro we could not. Of course Negroes weren't allowed to own

stores themselves, but some white men in the town had put up the money for most of the Negro-run stores and thus we had to be on our toes not to enter any stores with a Negro proprietor. It seemed that a "Nigger" could sense our niggardlyness and would watch us like a brown hawk until we had left his store.

We looked at each other and then around us. I think that I can speak for my two companions when I say that after mentally surveying the surrounding territory we were slightly uneasy. The store was in the middle of the block, a difficult place to escape from since the Jews cooperated in the capture of a running thief. The look of consternation that molded Gut's face was absolutely pathetic and had I not seen the shirt I might have suggested moving on.

The shirt was really *the* shirt. It was lying on a pile of other shirts that were mostly nondescript, at an angle that showed it off to best advantage. Words cannot describe the appearance of that shirt, though I suppose the most concise description possible would be to say that it was gold, absolutely gold. My mania for shirts did not usually extend to that type of shirt, but at that moment I just had to have that shirt and I just had to lift it.

I pushed Gut ahead of me into the store while his eyes mentally protested the injustice of the whole thing. We strolled up to the counter that held the shirts and accustomed our eyes to the darkness of the store. Seeing no one, I reached out and picked up the shirt. Just as I did so, Frankie coughed, just a small, nervous cough, but loud enough to raise the owner from his easy chair in the back of the store.

Seeing no other alternative, I quickly placed the shirt on the side of my bag away from him. As he walked up to us, or perhaps I should say, slid, for he was a greasy fellow, he started his spiel.

I looked over at Frankie and said, spy-like, "Stall." Frankie, in true con man style, led off with a request for a red shirt with purple stripes. The Cuban replied that he indeed had one like that and that he would get it for Frankie. Well, Frankie's face dropped half-a-mile as the man began to thumb through a stack of shirts. I had decided that this was to be my only chance and that I had better take it before the Cuban saw the shirt.

I slowly walked toward the door calling to Gut that I would meet them later. Just before I hit the sunlight I looked backed to see if I was detected. The man had not looked my way, eager as he was to search out the red shirt with purple stripes; however, Frankie threw me a look that can never be replaced. He was absolutely incredulous that I would do something like that to him.

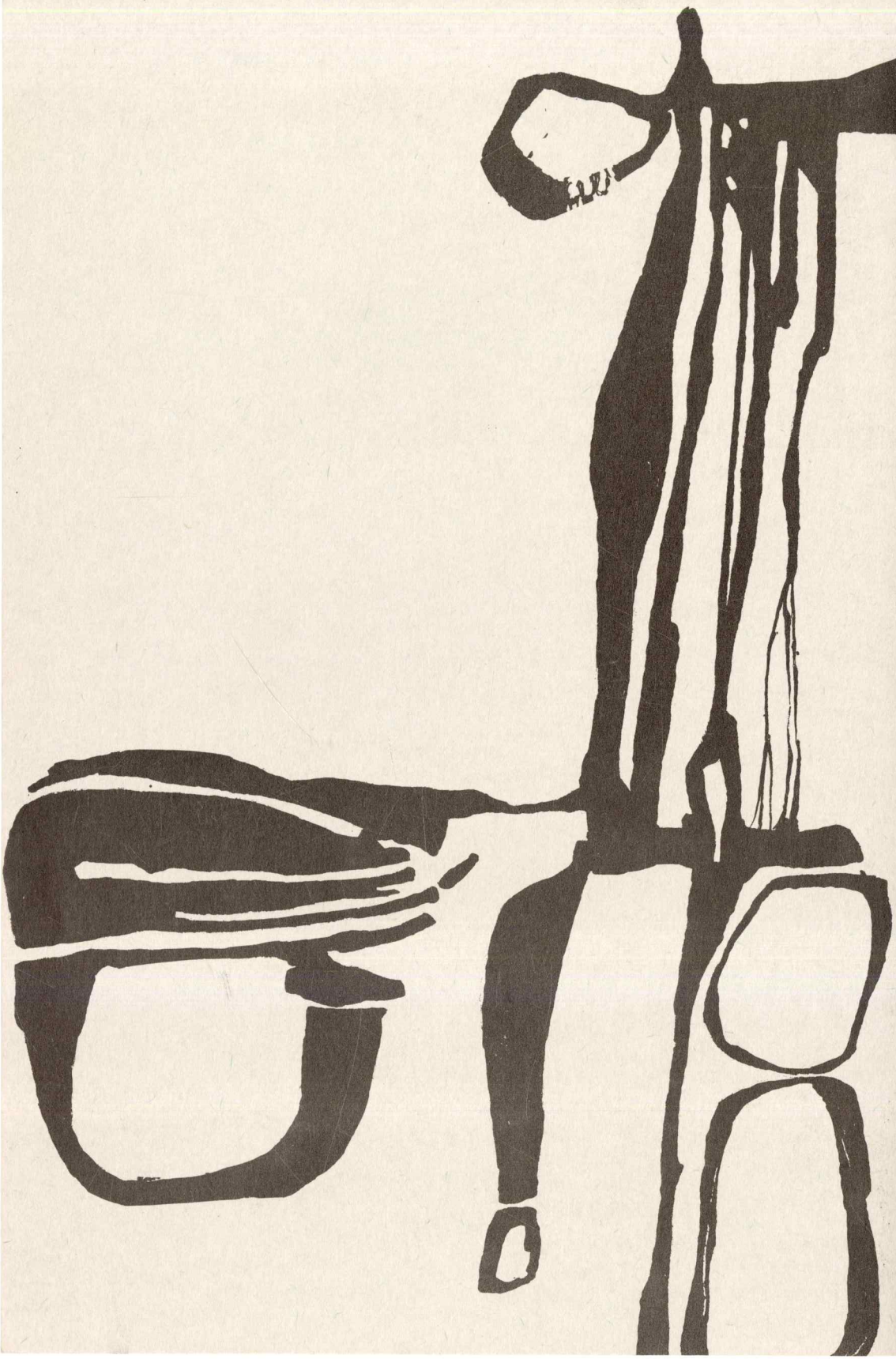
As I started down the sidewalk I could hear Frankie saying, "Well, what I really had in mind was a purple shirt with red stripes . . . "

Safely down the block I waited for my companions. After they had finally come up with a combination that the Cuban did not stock, they joined me and we nervously laughed all the way home.

I wore the shirt shortly after that, though my mother objected violently, and I was sorely dissolutioned when the gold faded out of the shirt and left it work pants gray.

Gut and Frankie were a little shaken up for awhile after this and then there was the newly-discovered sex to occupy our time, so we kind of dropped off of lifting.

Our journey into the land of Steal doesn't seem to have affected us for we are all wealthy, respectable members of society now. We still look back on such escapades though with a certain fondness.

Detrimental to character? Perhaps. But I still long for flashes of understanding such as I received when the color faded from my shirt, and Frankie has expressed boredom with the burden that respectability has placed on him, and Gut—well, Gut now hangs his gut over a banker's desk and has no place to run.

the power